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THE SMITHSONIAN SECRET

Why an innocent bird study went straight to biological warfare experts at Fort Detrick ■ By Ted Gup

Twenty years ago, a team of Smithsonian researchers landed on a string of remote Pacific islands to study the comings and goings of sea birds—terns, albatrosses, gulls. But there was another reason they were there, one stamped "Secret." The leaders of this scholarly band of curators and ecologists reported their findings to military scientists whose interest was not birds but biological weapons.

The Pacific project was two separate missions existing side by side: the Smithsonian's and the Pentagon's. The Smithsonian was only too eager to be given funds to study bird migratory patterns and the military was eager to find "safe" sites for atmospheric testing of biological weapons in the Pacific. Such sites could be determined from the Smithsonian research.

An Army spokesman says military scientists wanted to be certain germs would not be spread beyond the test sites by migrating birds. Other military scientists also wanted to know if sea birds

could be used as carriers of biological weapons, winging deadly disease across borders. In military terms, birds could be "avian vectors of disease."

The secret contract was an odd departure for the Smithsonian Institution, beloved and benign. Although the Smithsonian has for decades had unclassified research contracts with the Department of Defense, as it has with other federal departments and agencies, the Pacific Ocean Bird Project was not just another contract.

Smithsonian researchers burned copies of some project notes and correspondence with the military, but many of their originals are preserved in acid-free boxes deep within the Smithsonian's own archives, which are open to the public. Forgotten by many, consulted by few, the 17 square feet of records contain day-by-day accounts, maps, photos and correspondence with the military. All are pieces of a puzzle that show the Pacific Ocean Bird Project was one of the largest and most mysterious undertakings in the institution's 139-year history.

The Smithsonian said at the time that no part of the project was classified "secret." It was. The Smithso-

nian questioned how its scientists could know the military would use its study for biological weapons research. Some of those in charge of the project did know. In the end, the bird study caused a major self-examination within the Smithsonian that brought about a rededication to never again take on a secret study.

And today, 15 years after the project ended, a timeless question remains: What responsibility do scientists and institutions have to weigh how research—even basic research—will be used?

THE PACIFIC project spanned eight years, cost the Pentagon \$3 million, and involved dozens of Smithsonian staffers and Defense Department workers. From the first, the Smithsonian knew the contract was with the controversial Fort Detrick biological warfare research center in Frederick, Md. And even that fact was classified secret. The Smithsonian was prohibited from divulging anything about its work without clearance from Fort Detrick.

Early letters to Smithsonian contract officers made it clear the Army's interest went beyond ornithology. On Oct. 1, 1963, the Army Biological Laboratories at Fort

Detrick wrote to Smithsonian administrators about "Material containing Biological Weapons System information which reveals the nondescriptive code designations for BW [Biologic Weapons] agents . . .".

Although the pairing of the Smithsonian and Fort Detrick seems unlikely, in the early 1960s there were numerous ties between the military and research institutions. The Smithsonian's con-

tract was signed in October 1962, the same month that President Kennedy announced that Soviet missiles were in Cuba. Military exotica flourished: mind control through drugs, porpoises as animate torpedoes, new concoctions of chemical and biological weapons, turning life against life. It was a macabre time of Strangelovean fantasies when even one of God's gentlest creatures, a gull, could be considered for a doomsday assignment.

And there was another, simpler reason the Smithsonian took the contract. Money. The Smithsonian wanted more research funds.

The risks were great. If word got out that the revered Smithsonian was working on a classified project sponsored by the Army's biological war-